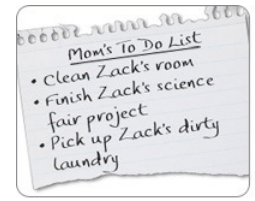


October Counselor's Corner

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Learned Helplessness Part I: Are You Doing Too Much for Your Child?

By Debbie Pincus, MS LMHC from www.empoweringparents.com

This year, Elementary Counseling is focusing on The Total Transformation Parenting Program. We will be sending home some of our favorite articles for you to get inspired by. Please look out for our upcoming parenting programs that support these newsletters.

Your child leaves his dirty clothes all over the house. Instead of getting into another fight with him or nagging him to pick them up, you do it for him. It's easier, right? Your daughter is having problems completing her science project. She can't seem to focus and complains that it's boring and too difficult. After she goes to sleep, you finish it for her. After all, you don't want her to fail.

"If a parent's emotional needs are met through their child, essentially they're tying her shoes for her every step of the way."

We all "over-function" in our relationships at times, particularly with our kids. And we often start without even realizing it. Let's say your toddler knows how to tie her shoes, but you tie them for her anyway, because it's faster—and it becomes a habit. Or you run back to school when your 8-year-old son, who never remembers anything, forgets his homework again. When you get stuck in a role of doing too much, you might find it hard to give up—and often, those around you might not want you to stop! It's easy to get stuck in this role because you feel needed, people rely on you and are impressed with how much you do. But understand that over-functioning isn't just a simple desire to be helpful or an annoying habit to overcome. Look at it this way: if you're always focused on everybody else, it's a way to *not* focus on yourself. Over-functioning is the way we've learned to manage our own anxiety by overdoing, just like your under-functioning child has learned to manage stress by *underdoing*. This turns into a problem when it becomes a fixed pattern in your family.

Is My Child an "Under-functioner"?

I once worked with a couple who always over-functioned for their child, doing things for her that she could do herself. This daughter always skated through classes because the parents did a lot of her homework. She did not learn how to rely on her own abilities, fall and pick herself back up when she failed, take the necessary risks, develop the ability to think for herself, or try things she might not succeed in doing. Her parents could not tolerate their own anxiety about the uncertainty of their daughter's performance or the pain of watching her struggle. By over-functioning for her, they inadvertently robbed her of the skills and practice necessary to develop competence and mastery in her life. In middle school, she started hanging out with the wrong crowd and getting in trouble. She didn't make it through college and is still living with her parents, who are still taking care of her. Needless to say, they're really burnt out.

If you have a child who has been diagnosed with a learning disability, is ADHD or struggles with behavior, it gives you even more of a reason to do too much for them. It may even feel as if it's expected and natural to over-focus on your child. But understand that it's not really doing them any favors in the long run, because they're not learning how to do things for themselves. And one day, your child will need to go out into the world and function as an adult. Of course, it's important to understand their disability and help them when appropriate, but try not to let your anxiety compel you to overdo for them and underdo for yourself. When that happens, you run the risk of ending up angry, resentful and burned out.

Does your child's behavior make you anxious?

What do adult under-functioners look like? Under-functioners are skilled in the art of "learned helplessness." They have quite literally learned to be helpless, because someone was always there to pick up the pieces for them. They often act irresponsibly, aren't able to handle uncomfortable emotions well, float without goals, become ill a lot, can tend to become addicted to substances, ask for advice when they need to figure things out for themselves and get others to always help them. They will often search out a partner who will take care of their needs and pick up where their parents left off. And keeping a job is hard for under-functioners, because they're always looking for someone to swoop in and rescue them. For many people who were raised this way, the world is a scary place—and instead of venturing out and making a life for themselves, they choose to stay home with mom and dad indefinitely.

Am I Doing Too Much?

If you're doing too much for your child, you will eventually feel burned out and put upon. You can determine if you are an over-functioner if you tend to move in quickly with advice, think you know what's best, not only for yourself but for others, have a low threshold for your child's pain and don't allow him to struggle with his own problems. You might have difficulty sharing your own vulnerability and spend more time focusing on others' goals than your own. The people around you probably think of you as always reliable and together.

How to motivate your child toward responsible behavior.

You might not see it as a problem until you start to burn out. Understand that over-functioning and under-functioning are a "circular relationship pattern" because these two roles feed off of each other. You may feel over responsible for your child, directing his moods, controlling his decisions and micro-managing his social life. In this way, you unwittingly encourage your child to be passive in life and become an under-functioner. When this happens, he begins to rely on you to do all the things he should be doing for himself. And you think, "He needs me. I can't just let him drown."

Please read part II in the November's Counselor's Corner